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## Interview with Nance Van Winckel

Tod Marshall: You've written many poems that use voices, that speak through different personas. From where do you think these voices come? Do you receive them? Or perhaps "retrieve" these voices that guide these poems?

Nance Van Winckel: I think about it more as finding an attitude or a certain tonality through which the poem originates—a kind of verbal posturing I hear from the speaker in the poem. And then I just try to hear that more closely. Of course, though I realize any poem's speaker is partly me, what I'm interested in are the parts that aren't as familiar to me, that aren't as recognizable.

I have a theory about where this comes from. I think as we mature we try on various personalities to figure out who we're going to be as adults, what we're going to be like, and in the process of trying on all these new personalities, we are also casting them off just as quickly because maybe they feel uncomfortable on us or maybe we don't know how to express ourselves inside of them. But I think what really happens is that we don't entirely cast them off. Instead, we bury these selves inside us. For instance, when I was growing up, say about twelve years old, I had a tomboy personality, and it manifested itself in a lot of ways. I was sarcastic to adults; I had a real rebellious streak; I played football and hung around with boys more than with girls. But

then somewhere I started to leave that self behind and tried to perceive myself in a more feminine way. But I think I never really left that tomboy self; I think it just went deeper down, and certainly that's a self that comes out from time to time in poems, a sort of sassy talker. Sometimes when I look at her I really do see someone talking with a hand on her hip—a whole attitude and gesture. I see her still as more a boy than a girl. I don't know if that might be the anima/animus, but I suspect there's some connection to that too.

TM Theorists talk about feminine versus masculine discourse. Do you think such theories apply to what you're saying? Are there strictly feminine voices or attitudes that inhabit your work? Or masculine? And do you think you can clearly distinguish between them?

NVW That's one of the things I try to find out in the drafting process. I try to distinguish. I try to see how the consciousness reveals *itself*. Partly that's what a poem is to me, an act of exploring what this consciousness is and where it's coming from and, in a more physical, concrete way, where it's located in time and space. So, yes, it does seem as if it's one or the other, male or female, but it often takes a long time for me to figure out who it is, and then when I do, the poem usually opens up; that's where the narrative begins to open up. Whoever is talking usually has a story to tell.

Czeslaw Milosz has written about this in his collection of essays, *Visions from San Francisco Bay*. He says this in "Essay in Which the Author Confesses That He Is on the Side of Man, for Lack of Anything Better":

*Every man and woman I pass on the street feels*

*trapped by the boundaries of their skin, but, in fact, they are delicate receiving instruments whose spirituality and corporeality vibrate in one specific manner because they have been set at one specific pitch. Each of them bears within himself a multitude of souls and, I maintain, of bodies as well, but only one soul and one body are at their disposal, the others remain unliberated.*

TM Milosz also talks about daimonions dictating his poetry to him; he says that we need to “hope / that good spirits, not evil ones, choose us for their instruments.” What do you do when one of these selves, one of these consciousness that seems to be entering your work seems to be malevolent? Do you try to exorcise such a “daimonion” through the writing?

NVW I can’t say that I’ve felt my way into anything that seemed evil. I certainly have felt my way into consciousnesses that are, well, *not* politically correct. But I’m not sure I think of them as evil. A lot of times, for instance, the women in my poems struggle with being under the power of men, under the spell of men—the new book I’m working on is called “After a Spell.” And certainly what’s going on in some of these poems—people having unjust power over other people, putting spells on them—is a harsh reality but politically not a very acceptable note to strike.

TM You’re very attracted to the work of Wallace Stevens. Yet out of all the modernist poets—I’m thinking of H.D., Pound, and Eliot especially—Stevens seems the least interested in personas; that is, he seems most interested in exploring his own mind, his own imaginative, epistemological relationship with the

world. Could you talk about your attraction to Stevens' work and perhaps what you've learned from him?

NVW Stevens went on his ear. I think that's first and foremost what I've loved about Stevens. Lately I've been reading Stevens again and looking at how he uses diction, levels of diction. Many of my favorite poems of his have this odd duality of diction. For instance, in "Academic Discourse at Havana" he has this really funky mix of academese and also a wonderful, lush aristocratic diction. Then there's the diction of decadence, of Florida and Cuba, the tropics; I call that Stevens' guilt discourse. I think he had a bit of guilt for being an aristocrat, trafficking in so much money. A lot of that flows out in his poems in a certain tongue in cheek way. I like how he puts these different dictions together, bounces back and forth between them. I'm thinking of these lines:

*The toil*

*Of thought evoked a peace eccentric to  
The eye and tinkling to the ear. Gruff drums  
could beat, yet not alarm the populace.  
The indolent progressions of the swans  
Made earth come right; a peanut parody  
For peanut people.*

There's this kind of nuttiness in this juxtaposition, a kind of almost self-effacement about where he is, how learned he is, and the way his relationship to the poetry world keeps creeping in to this really lush world of the concrete, the physical. The dictions keep crossing over on each other. I think it's this tonal play I'm attracted to; he played tonalities like his own invented notes on a language scale. And the poems are so rich in other sorts

of music as well, wide deep vowels and clackety consonates like castanets.

TM “The Comedian as the Letter C” is probably a prime example of that type of play:

*Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil,  
The sovereign ghost. As such, the Socrates  
Of snails, musician of pears, principium  
And lex.*

The poem is, throughout, such fun; he makes fun of the pedagogue...

NVW Possibly he was a bit chagrined that he was so smart.

TM Rilke is another modernist who is very dear to you. In your recent book, *The Dirt*, one might even call Rilke a sort of guiding angel. What interests you most in his work? Is there a particular period of his work you're most attracted to? Which poems do you return to most often?

NVW Well, of course I love the *Elegies*. I guess those are the ones I read most frequently, but I also like the poems that come just before the *Elegies* or, I suppose, in the middle of the *Elegies*. He'd written a few of them when he'd began suffering from writer's block and he couldn't get any more of the *Elegies* out; he went back to these other poems that are sort of prayer poems. I think that's what appeals to me—the permission he gives himself to offer prayers. He seems to demand of himself that he stay connected to something bigger than he is; to call out toward the spiritual plane, and to

recognize that whatever he does in poetry has to have a foot, even just the a tiny penetration, into that plane. I'm touched by the way he bolstered himself and kept telling himself in various poem-mantras that the spiritual world existed as much as the physical world; his poems were his way of putting feelers out there.

TM In Robert Hass's essay on Rilke that introduced Stephen Mitchell's translations, he talks about Rilke's disdain for this world, the physical realm, and how he attempts to distance himself from it, and you talk about your attraction to his supplication and his attachment to an idealistic realm, yet in your book where we find Rilke as an epigraphical-angel, so many of the poems are so physical, so "of this world." Could you talk about that tension?

NW Your question takes me back to Rilke's "Spanish Trilogy." I think what we see there was how he believed we get to the spiritual through the physical. That poem talks about looking at a landscape, at sheep "penned in the fold at night / enduring the great dark absence of the world." For me a poem has to come *through* the physical; the things have to somehow be pulled inside—the landscape, as well as the people. I think very much it's got to have the physical presence of the the people, the folk. That's one of the good things to look at in this particular Rilke poem: "old men left alone at the asylum / who cough in bed, importantly, from children / drunk with sleep upon the breasts of strangers." They're just ordinary people, and you have to surround them with...I don't know what to call it...your humanity perhaps, and take them through you, and that's how you arrive at the spiritual, by always internalizing what's around in the physical



world.

TM And somehow that internalizing elevates things toward the ideal, the beautiful?

NVW Well, I guess that's where I don't feel very Rilkean as a writer myself; I don't feel it has to be beautiful. But maybe that depends on how you define beauty. I simply have to feel that the poem finally belongs outside me, is shared, that the story that's told, the landscape it's from and the consciousness we've entered, are shared.

TM One thing that Milosz talks about that is in a similar vein—one thing that saved him when he was experiencing a crisis—was thinking and meditating on a scene he had witnessed in the post-war years of a peasant family sharing tea in a train station amidst an incredible chaos of relocation, sharing a fundamental human gesture that he saw as more “real” than anything else that was going on around them. Is this more in the direction of what you're implying?

NVW Exactly, yes. I think what you've described Milosz talking about is supremely beautiful, people trying to maintain, amidst their poverty and desperate circumstances, some element that, for them, contains what is beautiful in life. This makes me think of Elizabeth Bishop and a poem of hers that I love, “Filling Station,” where she buzzes by in her rich-person car for a fill-up, and she, in typical Bishop fashion, just describes the filth of this gas station. But then, as she's looking at it, she starts to notice all these little elements that the people who work there have gathered to try to give their lives beauty. Small things.



They've put a crocheted doily under a half-dead begonia. Probably we would think this is tacky, but these people live in an ugly place full of oil and grease and the smell of gasoline and this is what they've done to bring beauty into their lives; it's a little thing but it means so much and is so striking in that poem.

TM An empathy that embraces more than just the stereotypes, that is actively interested in all the little ins and outs of other individuals.

NVW The ability to project into an otherness is what we need to do more of as a people. It's an act of the imagination, and lately I've been worried that it's exactly the sort of imaginative acumen the Newt Gingriches of the world are trying to shut down. They try to reduce everyone to clones of their own values and social mythology. People who cannot imagine other people's lives in specific detail, but only in generalities and types, tend to huddle together in fear of a type, say of illegal immigrants. They're only viewed in the most general way, as a cliché. I think when people reduce their world to clichés in this way, and this seems so much the mindset of many of our newly elected officials, such clichés foster hysteria. It's the easiest kind of comfort to drift toward the mob mentality, where everybody is right and good except those who don't think exactly like you. Our whole culture was built on the values of multiplicity and diversity. We can't suddenly decide that's *not* what we're about, can we?

TM Earlier you talked about "attitudes" or "consciousnesses" that you pursue or follow in the writing of the poem as, at a certain point, turning into

narrative. Do you see your work as primarily narrative or lyrical or meditative lyrical? Or do any of these descriptive titles work?

NVW I keep trying to cut away from my poems as much of the narrative understructure as I can and still have the poems stand—that is, trying to have them rely more on voice, a certain credibility of the mind I’m striving for and that the reader is, I hope, residing in as I am. But I can’t ever seem to get away from narrative entirely; sometimes a poem becomes most completely narrative when I realize that it is the story that is at the crux of why these people “are talking to me” in the first place. Sometimes it’s something other than story, say a contradiction that’s buried in stuff that’s emotional or psychological, and “how they got there” is not as important as looking at the different sides of their lives that are pulling at them. I think my work is probably always going to be both. I’ve written some short, more lyrical poems, but I don’t think I’m ever going to stop writing poems with at least some elements of narrative.

TM You spoke of, perhaps, trying to clip some of the narrative understructure out and, simultaneously, you’ve been writing a great deal of fiction. In *Limited Lifetime Warranty* you’ve written a series of interconnected stories. When you wrote that book did you have any models in mind? Anderson? Joyce? Dos Passos?

NVW Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* is a book that I’ve discussed with classes many times. I think I’ve been very influenced by what he did structurally in *Winesburg*, but also by his idea of the “grotesque”—those people in his book who believe one

thing above all others and block out all else, all other possibilities from their lives, because of that.

TM Do you work on the two genres separately? Do you have a “fiction mode” where you just work on your stories for a few weeks and then come back to the poems? Or do you just tinker with both simultaneously?

NVW I’m still figuring this out. It feels very schizophrenic to me right now. I wake up and I don’t know which I’m going to be until I get to my writing desk after my coffee and cereal, and then somehow I know. I’m not sure what it is; perhaps it has something to do with what goes on overnight in the subconscious, applying my subconscious to the task of working out during sleep those writing tasks that need to be solved. Some mornings I wake up and I have a whole scene of dialogue in my head—there’s this big discussion going on!—and I just go in and write it all down. Other days it’s a line or phrase of a poem. I wish I had a system; it’s very muddled right now.

TM I heard Rick Bass say once that reading poetry is good for a short story writer because it’s like lifting weights. I like to flip the simile and say that writing fiction is good for a poet because it’s like loosening up and going out for a nice, easy jog. Do you feel a different attachment to the language when you’re writing in one genre versus the other?

NVW Definitely in poetry I feel language is what I’m hearing and attending to most. Other things, like structure and attention to image, often seem to be on automatic pilot in poems. But I’m such a newcomer to

fiction that I have to focus a lot of energy still on that thing they call “plot.” It’s a challenge for me to find the right structures and chronological movement to contain the details that have drawn me into a story in the first place. Working on stories has probably been a good outlet for my narrative impulses, so that I don’t believe I still push on the narrative structures in my poems, at least not as much as I used to. And that feels fairly liberating: not to have to undergird so much narrative on a poem that feels mostly to belong to voice and consciousness.

TM     You’ve told me that you’re writing a novel now. Looking at *Limited Lifetime Warranty*, how do you exactly distinguish between a large collection of interconnected stories and a novel?

NVW   I think that in a novel, collectively the chapters have to work to answer a question or a set of questions. There are ongoing problems to be addressed. And in a collection of interconnected stories the overall questions and the ways they’re worked through get to be more like variations on a theme. Also, it’s wonderful to be able to introduce characters in, say, story number three and have them reappear in story number seven, and nobody seems to mind that they were absent through stories four, five, and six. Basically what you’re doing in interconnected stories is creating this world, this landscape for the stories, that serves as a kind of backdrop, and you get to step in and out of it. You can be dreamy in one story and straight-forward in another. The backdrop is the same, so there’s a sense of cohesion.

TM     With your recent interest in fiction, do you find

yourself reading more contemporary fiction than poetry? Or is your reading time taken up by research?

NVW All of the above. I write book reviews of poetry still, so I continue to read several new books of poetry every week. I'm always involved in a novel or book of short stories for "pleasure." And then I do enjoy research for, usually, the fiction I'm working on, as opposed to the poetry. I read a lot of science, for instance, some information on woolly mammoth fossils for the novel I'm working on, and also some rather nutty stuff on psychic detectives for a short story.

TM Also as an editor and a teacher, you read a great deal of contemporary work. How do you think your position as editor of *Willow Springs* has affected your own writing?

NVW I like something I heard Donald Hall say once, or maybe I read it somewhere, that he has different rooms in his house where he works on his prose or on his poetry. The work I do as editor helps keep fresh in my mind, but in a fairly unobtrusive way, what's important in both genres. I guess I'd define it most generally as that feeling that comes off the page that the poem or the story took the writer by the shoulders and shook him or her. There's a sense that the work made clear its demands, through a passionate outpouring that pervades the language, on the writer. The feeling that a literary work grew beyond what its author knew, *consciously* knew, that it brought pain or joy, and always surprise, that *some* sort of intense emotion propelled the work—that's what elevates a piece of writing past the ordinary, past the 95% of manuscripts I read every week, many of which are well-crafted, but

lack that rush, that sweep of passion.

TM Several contemporary poets have argued that the art of poetry needs to be repopularized, that, in the formulation of Joseph Brodsky, it needs to get on the check-out shelf at supermarkets. How do you understand poetry's role in culture?

NVW I think poetry is, right now, at odds with culture. I think that, as you mentioned, a lot of people have been talking about this so what I'm suggesting isn't new, but it's what Walt Whitman was getting at, what he was saying when he described himself as

*Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,  
Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking, and  
breeding,  
No sentimentalist, no stander above men and  
women or apart from them,  
No more modest than immodest.*

And see, there's that passion, that grand stance of the work being bigger than the man. He's its mouthpiece. I feel that many poets today feel that they're apart from "ordinary folk," and in turn, many so-called ordinary folk feel that we as poets don't have anything to say to them. Sadly, we all deserve the divorce that we've gotten from each other. We're all responsible for it; I think poetry does have a lot to say to ordinary folks, but one needs to say those things in a language that is both comprehensible and endearing to them. For most people I know, there's precious little time for anything else in their lives that takes concentration and emotional and mental energy but work and family, and I suspect that's why the arts in general and poetry in particular

are neglected—because poetry does take a lot of energy.

TM Do you think in your future writing you'll turn even more toward prose or do you think you'll continue in this schizophrenic state?

NVW I'm not sure, but I remember something my friend Lisel Mueller told me several years ago: she thought that perhaps what literary culture was evolving towards is one genre, something that would be a kind of cross between poetry and fiction, fictional prose. That's interesting to me; I'm very interested in the prose poem. I don't write them but I like to read them. I'm interested too in seeing the connections between the two genres, the places where they intersect. And although I suspect fiction is taking over more and more control of the mainstream literary marketplace, it's come to seem an act of faith to write poems. It's probably an act of faith to read them too. For those who can make a space in their lives for this sort of thing, they're meditation tools. They're a way of asserting some quietude and contemplation into the chaos. Certainly there's no drought of good poems to steer one this way, and I'm sure I'll never lose my own faith in them.